Blood and Feathers and Antlers

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Blood and Feathers and Antlers

by TheSilverQueen

Summary

When Will was a young fawn, all he ever wanted was to grow up as proud and strong as his idol, the Prince of the Forest, Jack. And then one day he wandered off the path and into the strangest pool he'd ever seen. It was red as those sharp roses whose thorns Will had learned the hard way not to eat and smelled like the metal that he'd seen two-legs leave behind. It takes a few drinks to realize that it's blood. When he jumps back in shock, he ends up bumping into the biggest stag he's ever seen, bigger than Will's father, bigger than even the great Prince of the Forest, with antlers as tall as Will himself and feathers as black as night.

"Hello, little fawn," says the Ravenstag, "what have we here?"

A Hannigram Bambi AU - Now with this AMAZING ART by sokuria

Notes

This is my contribution to the 2016 Hannibal Big Bang ! My first ever Big Bang, and it was a total blast, thank you so much to the lovely mods, especially m-oarts, who worked so hard to get this off the ground.

Thanks to the Fannibals on tumblr and telegram who listened to me moan about writing this fic, gave me feedback, and in general offered me support whenever I asked for it.

Many more thanks to my lovely artist, @sokuria, who also cheered me on and wrote the funniest comments on the art drafts I got. You can see the lovely, gorgeous, beautiful art that sokuria gifted me with HERE ON TUMBLR, please go give lots and lots and LOTS of love to it!

Finally - yes, I am quite aware that deer cannot actually see the color red. But Will is special okay? And so is Hannibal. And everyone else is at least a talking animal, soooo . . . in this universe, let's just pretend deer can see all the colors of the rainbow, okay? Okay.

See the end of the work for more notes

Every bedtime story has to have a hero and a boogeyman, doesn't it? For every angel watching over one in sleep, there is a demon waiting to pull out feet from blankets. For every wish upon a shooting star, there is a wish one should have been careful to wish for. For every Hansel and Gretel with breadcrumbs to remember the way, there is a Little Red Riding Hood who strays too far.

And for every Great Prince of the Forest, there is a Ravenstag.

When Will is born, there isn't a big stampede of birds and squirrels and rabbits and skunks and chipmunks and owls and other animals to watch him come into the world. No, that right is reserved for the first fawn of the season, and Will is the middle child of the middle season. So he is born in a quiet little thicket with only the sun and trees as witness to his first wobbling steps, with his mother nudging him quietly and licking him clean. It is warm and quiet and there is a beautiful breeze, and when Will tires of wobbling around and falling flat on his face, his mother gathers him close and he watches the world around him with rapt attention.

"Will," she calls him, "I'll call you Will. Welcome to the big wide world."

The first thunderstorm strikes during the night. Will wakes to a constant wet drop on his nose, and he follows the constant drip outside the thicket, from a tiny leaf to a little branch to a bigger branch in a big tree. The slow roll of a droplet mesmerizes him, falling so smoothly over and over until it hits the end of a leaf, where it pauses to gather its strength and its size before flinging itself off in a like bird launching from a branch – to land on his nose again.

Will sneezes, but before he can wrench himself away, another drop falls. But this time it falls on his back, and it startles him, because he was only watching the ones rolling down in front.

He hears a shout in the distance, probably his mother, and it's as he's traipsing slowly back that he notices that the sky water is falling faster and faster, to the point where he's happy to pick up the pace home. The journey of the drops is fascinating – but less so when it's making him cold and soggy, so that his fur is slick and the ground slippery and his nose is hampered by the smell of muddy earth all around him.

He's just at the entrance to the thicket where there is an enormous flash of light, as bright as the sun.

"Will, come and sleep," his mother says.

But Will can't resist. The sun is warm and lovely, and that flash was like a bolt of sun falling from a patch in the trees above. "What was that?" he asks, and stands his ground, hoping for another.

"We call it sky fire," his mother tells him. "And it can burn, little one, so mind your head. Come inside now."

"But – "

That's when the world shatters around him.

Next thing Will knows, he's half underneath his mother. His ears are back, legs tense and ready to run, tail tucked against his legs, and his ears won't stop ringing. It was like the world turned into one giant sound that leaves his legs mush and his brain on fire.

For a second, there is peace.

Well, except for the rain dripping nonstop on his tail, but there's silence, and Will's mother seems completely relaxed, so he cautiously peeks his head back out.

Just in time for another eye watering flash.

Will's mother for the first time doesn't laugh when he tries to bury himself under her. "You've grown too big," she complains, and forces him to rearrange so that he's only tucked against her side. "You're growing up, Will, and this won't be the last skyfire storm you'll see. Eventually, you'll learn that sky water is a good thing, even if you are a bit wet," she concludes, licking some of that annoying water from his face.

"Tell me a story," Will begs. He can't possibly sleep like this. His mind is literally on fire with all the wonder and fear of it, and he can't even consider the next storm, never mind the dozens his mother says she's seen.

So his mother tells him, for the first time but not the last, of the great Ravenstag. "He is blood and feathers and antlers," she starts, the same way she always will. "The cunning raven and the wise stag, able to run down any deer and tall enough to shake down trees. He has black feathers and red glowing eyes and antlers tall enough to reach the sun. He hides in the darkest shadows and the deepest rivers and he'll see you long before you even think you've caught a glimpse at him. If you let him catch you, he'll never let you go, so you best grow up quick, little fawn, and learn to run. Learn to run like the wind, and maybe, just maybe, you'll outpace him. But if you don't . . ."

Will never does hear the end of that story. He always falls asleep, and dreams of feathers black as night.

When Will is finally old enough to walk for most of the day without being too tired to come home, his mother says that it is time to meet the others.

"What others?" he asks. "I've already met the burrs."

“Birds,” she corrects gently. “Birds, Will.”

“Them. And then flybutters too.”

“Butterflies. And no, I mean the other deer, Will, you’ll meet them once we reach the meadow.”

And Will wants to ask so many more questions – What other deer? Why hasn’t he met them before? What is a meadow? Where is the meadow? – but he can sense his mother getting impatient, so he doesn’t ask. She tells him often that he’s not the first fawn she’s ever had, but when he had asked if he could ever meet his siblings, she’d left exasperated for some “alone time”. She says he asks too many questions, wonders too much, but Will looks at everything and wonders too much. Does a ripple ever go against the current? Does a leaf ever float up instead of down? Does a flybutter ever change colors? Does a bird every fly too close to the sun? Does –

“Will!”

“Yes, Mother?”

“Pay attention,” she says, and it’s the most serious tone of voice he’s ever heard from her, so he stops and obediently listens. They’ve stopped on the rise of a small grassy hill, and in front all Will can see is bushes, bushes, and more bushes, but she must want to tell him something important, so he should listen.

But still . . . he wonders, can a bush feel it when he pushes past? Can a leaf feel pain? Can a berry bleed? Can –

“Will, listen to me. If I call for you, you must come immediately. This is not the season for Man, but it soon will be. Do you understand?”

“What is Man?”

His mother sighs, and he shelves his questions. “That is not the important part, Will. If Man is in the meadow, we all must run. Do you understand? Run and never ever stop, not until you’ve reached the thicket.”

“What if Man follows?” he wants to know, because Will still isn’t as fast as his mother. She can cover much more ground faster than he can, and sometimes he feels as if he’ll never catch up. One time she called him home and he spent most of the sun’s fall following a bug flying through the woods. Another time he’d followed a ripple downstream, until it emptied into a huge river that he’d almost wanted to cross – until he saw the silver jumpers leaping up and down, that is. His mother says that he gets too curious, but how can he not be?

“Promise me you’ll run,” she says, so he promises, because that is what she wants him to do, and he doesn’t want to disappoint her in this as well.

Promise secured, Will’s mother leads him past the bushes and the crooked red tree and the old soft stump, and then suddenly they are in a huge wide expanse of green, and green, and

more green, and scattered among the green are deer – deer like him, and his mother, tall and leggy and brown, some raising their heads in greeting and interest, and others with their legs folded up and still more in the distance, noses to the ground, and for a second it's like a big mosaic and colors and feelings and emotions, all at once, brown and gold and interest and curiosity and green and annoyance and white and apathy and more, until it feels like Will's head is too large to contain anything else, the hollow inside of him filled to overflowing, driving out the butterflies and birds and leaves and –

A wet nose touches him.

Will's six yards away before he even realized he moved.

"Hello!" chirps a she-fawn. She's still got her white spots, like him, but her legs don't wobble and her ears are pricked forward in interest. She's quick too, covering half of the distance between them in a blink of an eye. "Hi, I'm Alana!"

Will opens his mouth . . . and then runs back to his mother.

One time, when his mother delivers the story sounding rather tired of it all, Will asks her why the Ravenstag is cunning and wise. Surely, he asks, only one is needed to stalk prey?

“It’s just a story, Will,” she tells him. “Just a story for little fawns.”

That doesn’t stop Will’s dreams of black feathers, although that’s when they start acquiring little flecks of blood.

A few days later, his mother tries again. This time she doesn’t say where they’re going until they’re already there, because the last three times she tried, he turned right back around and sulked in the thicket. No matter how he tries, he can’t explain why he ran away, even though he can see, clear as day, in his mind. All of those minds, chattering away, filled him up until he couldn’t tell what was Will and what wasn’t. It took him an entire day just to pick free Alana, all sweet white spots and melodic voice and friendly optimism. His mother tells him that it’ll get better with more exposure, because of course other deer look and sound and smell different, but she doesn’t seem to understand that that is just the surface. To Will, each deer is different, but not in smell, look, and sound, but in attitude and outlook and mind. Each is a new glittering neon point of light in the night sky of the meadow, and he’s not sure he’s ready to look up without having his eyes seared out for the brightness.

To his mother’s credit, the next time is a little easier. Alana and her friend Beverly are brightly shining points indeed, but they are young and malleable, like him, and the clear nature of their sweetness makes it easier to separate them from him when they bleed over.

Will is not nearly so sweet.

But he doesn’t tell them that, because his mother says not to.

“Why feathers?” Will asks another time. “Fur is so warm.”

Will can’t imagine the coolest of nights without his coat of fur to protect him, and it’s not even as deep and warm as his mother’s coat. Feathers, though, are different. Will’s found a few. Picked them up, sneezed them out, stepped on them. They are light and insubstantial as a water drop, which Will supposes makes it easier for the birds who fly, but the Ravenstag is a stag. A deer, just like him.

“It’s just a story, Will. A story for little fawns. Now sleep.”

That time when Will dreams, the black feathers with blood flecks acquire little razor edges, sharp as a thicket thorn that draw blood as just as easily.

And then there is the day where everything stops.

In the beginning, Will sees no difference. They go to the meadow in the cool morning, when dew still makes the grass ticklish, and Will wanders off to let the pleasant chattering and giggles of Alana and Beverly wash over him, accepting the ripples without being dragged

down by the current. But then suddenly every single deer stops, exactly as they were standing, and every head and tail comes up.

Will would ask what is going on, except that even Alana and Beverly are stock still, like a fly caught in a spider's web, immovable and suddenly one-dimensional, one small part in a larger web. Even the young bucks who are bigger and older than Will who spend their time chasing around the meadow and showing off have come to a complete halt, some even with legs still frozen mid-step, noses outstretched, antlers inches away from contact. All eyes are on one spot, all ears pricked in the exact same direction, and it's like every single deer is receiving some kind of message that Will can't see or hear or smell or feel. The meadow smells the same as it always has. The sun is shining with no storm approaching. The ground isn't vibrating like it had that one time Will and everyone else had bolted because they'd felt something stalking them in the trees. The entire meadow is so quiet Will can hear the leaves bowing in the wind, even.

And then, slowly but surely, a head emerges from the trees.

It's an enormous crown of antlers, taller than any crown Will's seen on any of the deer. It far outweighs the cocky bucks who sometimes snap at Alana and Beverly and him.

And then shortly after the majestic crown comes the rest of the stag, tall and glorious, moving as slowly as snail into the light. His fur is rich and textured, his steps are firm and sure, and his eyes are lit with dwindling inner fire, like they've seen many passing sunsets and contain all of that dying light inside to reflect the days past.

To Will, he looks . . . interesting.

Currently, though, he has questions. Who is this stag? Why hasn't Will seen him before? Why is his crown so large? Why doesn't he have any of the scars like some of the young bucks do? Why does he walk so slowly? Why isn't anyone talking anymore? How old is he? What is his name? Where did he come from? Is he from another meadow? How does he get anywhere if it takes him seven heartbeats to put one foot down? Does he eat grass too? Does he get hurt like Will and everyone else does? Has he ever been hurt? Where was he born? Who's his mother? Why is he here now? What does his arrival mean? Will he stay long? Will he ever come back again?

Will's so busy looking for his mother in order to ask some of these pent-up questions that he doesn't realize that the breeze has stopped until he realizes that the obstruction is standing right in front of him.

The stag is standing right in front of him.

Every other deer the stag has passed has lowered their head, almost like they're afraid to meet his eyes. These a series of lowered heads behind him, tails kept low, feet frozen firmly in place. Even Alana and Beverly now are lowering their heads, their legs trembling so much they're almost collapsing to the ground.

Will, though.

Will just looks up and up and up, into the great forest of antlers, and thinks, Why?

The great stag blinks solemnly at him, and then something twitches in the corner of his mouth. Will would say it's a smile, but deer don't smile around him. He's not really the smiling-prompting type. It's more like a consideration, although of what he doesn't know.

Then the great stag seems to straighten, although he never seemed to get any closer to Will's eye level, and he raises his head so that his crown of antlers rises unchallenged far above the rest of the heads of everyone else there. This time, for some reason, although he never seems to place his hooves down any faster, he seems to move further away faster, as though his business is done and now he's going to carry on however great stags do. He only pauses once at the edge of the meadow, where one doe detaches from the herd to join. She too seems aged, with fur darker than Will's mother and an even slower pace than the great stag.

Together, they leave the meadow, and everyone breathes again.

"Who was that?" Will asks.

Alana blinks at him. "You don't know? How could you not know?"

For that, Will has no answer. How can he account for something he did not know that he did not know?

Beverly, thankfully, steps in. "It was the Great Prince of the Forest," she says, voice hushed and solemn as if the stag was still in earshot, each word carefully enunciated like Will is young and barely can hear again.

"Why did everyone stop when he came to the meadow?"

"Because he deserves our respect," Will's mother says, coming up behind him and nuzzling his back. It's the first time that's happened in a long time, but for once he doesn't feel the inclination to beg for more or hide under her care. He's too curious. "For all the deer that live in the forest, not one has lived half as long as he. He's very brave, very wise, and very old. That is why he is called the Great Prince."

Will lets that roll around for a bit. For deer, as his mother has taught him, age is to be respected. It's difficult to grow old, as one must be talented in order to find enough food and avoid the dreaded Man.

Yet.

How does everyone know that is he so very brave and wise if he's almost never seen?

"Mother, why – "

"Not now, Will," his mother says wearily, and moves off. "That's enough questions for today."

"Is he an actual stag? Like I will be?" Will wonders.

His mother doesn't reply this time. She's grown tired of the story, and has refused to repeat it now no matter how much he begs. But she also no longer points out the best grass patches and bark of trees, telling him that he should learn on his own, so perhaps it's part of that.

"Go to sleep, Will," she replies finally. "Otherwise you won't be any kind of stag."

That night, Will wakes up half the forest, screaming, because the feathers had pushed their way through his fur, razor sharp and glittering with blood, whilst antlers emerged from his forehead stretching so high that he fell to the ground, crushed under their weight, a little fawn sinking under the might of the Ravenstag's glory until he'd opened his eyes and seen nothing but smears of black against a pool of blood, his own blood, and he'd been unable to do anything at all, even scream.

For the first time, his mother does not reach over to comfort him.

As the temperature cools, Will finds that his interest in the meadow cools equally. Alana and Beverly are the only fawns who really talk to him, and they get along much better just by themselves. The bucks don't like Will at all, and after the first time getting trampled by the anxious herd of show-offs he's not really eager to try again.

So he wanders off. His mother doesn't stop him, since she's generally chatting with the other does or eating, and he knows his way through the forest and back home well enough.

The first time, he finds a thicket with flowers red as the sky when the sun sets. It mesmerizes him, because he's never seen a color so deep and thorough before that isn't the black of night. Will wonders if it will taste like more like the colorless water of the stream or the pale grass of the meadow or the fluffy petals of the daises that his mother told him were a delicacy.

The first bite is bliss – just softness, even softer than the bed of grass in the thicket and his mother's voice and the fur of his coat.

The second bite is pain.

Will jerks back, shaking his head in agony, because the second bite was full of sharp things and now his tongue aches so acutely it feels like the first time he'd taken a step and fallen on his nose.

He runs all the way home and shoves his mouth in the water of the nearest stream, hoping against hope for the cold to drown out the pain, and it mostly does, but it also leaves him with liquid dripping from his tongue and a red stain all down the riverbanks.

Somewhat nonsensically, that night as he dreams, he wonders if that's why the flowers were so red, because of the blood of unwitting strangers lured in for a taste.

The second time Will wanders off, he finds baby birds for the first time.

Well, a baby bird.

It's a little bird with dark feathers, chirping softly and fearfully in the brush. Will thinks it's fallen out of its nest, but whenever he goes for a closer look the chirps grow louder and the baby gathers itself and hops backwards. Will could easily catch up, but eventually he settles for laying down and watching, curious, to see if the parents will return and pick up their child the same way his mother used to come and gather him when he grew too tired to walk all the way back home.

That's when a young buck comes through, nose to the ground, and chews the baby bird up without pause.

"No!" Will says without thinking, leaping up from his hiding place.

Pazzi leaves him with a hoof print in his belly and bruises all down his back. His mother sees him limp home and merely sighs. For the first time in weeks, she licks him carefully, even though she no longer lets him nestle into her side at night. She coaxes out the story from him, and after a long moment, she says, "Do you still hear the screams of the baby birds?"

Will doesn't answer. The answer would be futile. He doesn't just hear the screams. He can see it, the moment when teeth clamped tight and blood poured out, and more importantly, he can feel it. He is both the jaws of doom that chomp down to consume and destroy, and the baby who stretches his wings out in a futile attempt to flee. Food and feeder both, in a never-ending circle of crushing pain as his bones grind to dust and eternal hunger that drives him to consume baby grass and birds alike.

"Don't think about it," his mother orders. "No good will come of that."

The third time Will wanders off, he finds what his mother calls a "Man thicket." Instead of branches and brush, it's a strange velvety skin that surrounds a peculiar shape. Later on his mother will tell him that Man sleeps instead them the same way they bed down into their ticket, but for now, Will settles for determining what is tasty inside.

The velvety skin is a bit too slick for his taste, and tastes strange. So does the circles of grey that dot the campsite, like unnatural gourds of trees molded and shaped.

There is also another four-legger like him.

It makes a strange sound at him when it sees Will, and Will honestly can't tell if it's a greeting or a warning. Yet when it licks him, it reminds him of his mother, and so he lowers himself in greeting and pricks his ears in an offering to play.

It takes itself up on his offer, and they spend a good portion of the sun's passing romping about the Man thicket.

Except that then a two-legger comes back, and Will takes off in fear.

It is his first experience with Man, and his mother says nothing when he tells her.

Winter is miserable. At first, Will loves the cold, and he rolls and rolls and rolls around while his mother laughs.

Then he realizes that a cool snow bath is nothing compared to the cold of an empty belly, and winter's joy dies off quickly. They chew on hard tough bark that rattles his teeth and only barely sates his stomach, and they munch on ice and snow to quench their thirst. His mother still won't really let him nestle close, so most nights he curls up as small as he can near the thicket and shivers his way into sleep.

On the plus side, his dreams stop for the most part. He's too cold and hungry to dream of blood.

Then one morning, after a particularly bad dream of blood and ravens for food and water, Will wakes up and his mother is gone.

"Mother? Mother!"

Snow is still falling, and there is no trail of tracks of follow. The thicket smells like snow and ice and dampness, and he can't pick up his mother's scent. Will dashes out in search of her, but he already knows that it's no use. If he can't see, hear, or smell her, then he'll never find her, but if never finds her, he also knows he won't make it. All of the bark has been stripped from the lower branches and trees, so he'll starve.

"Mother," he whimpers, and comes to a halt what seems like days and days of endless snow later.

He can't even find his way home now.

"William."

Will jumps back several paces in shock, although he doesn't actually go that far because the snow is so high it practically makes it impossible to walk. To his shock, in front of him is the Great Prince, as regal now with the darkness of the sky and blinding whiteness of the snow as he was imposing in the meadow with every deer's head lowered in respect.

"Your mother can't care for you anymore," the Great Prince says. "Come."

"But I want her."

And Will does want her. For all that she'd begun to push him aside, for all that she'd failed to comfort him, for all that she'd not understood about him, she'd still brought him to the meadow and ripped down scraps of bark to keep fed. She'd still been part of him.

"She can't care for you anymore," the Great Prince repeats, and it's far less patient this time. "Come with me."

So Will does.

Will spends the winter sharing his time between Alana and her mother and the Great Prince and Bella. Between the two of them, he's kept fed and warm, even though they're much less likely to notice if he wanders off. In any case, Will doesn't wander too much during the winter, because the snow makes his legs cold and his breath steam, but every once a while, he'll find himself back at the thicket, confused and terribly sad and hoping for even the tiniest whisper of his mother's scent.

When the snow begins to melt and the rivers begin to swell, Will makes his first deliberate return to the thicket.

That's when he sees it.

It's a trail, the kind the Great Prince taught him to see, of grass crushed underfoot and fur caught on scratchy bark and dirt ground up. Before he can hope too much or think too hard, Will's off, bounding after the trail, because it's the kind of trail made in a hurry and he's grown stronger over the winter. He can keep up with the Great Prince and Bella now, and if he hurries, maybe, just maybe, he can catch up to his mother.

Which is when Will splashes into the strange pool.

He would call it a runoff from a river or stream, the way the Great Prince does, but it's not. It's red, as red as the flowers that made Will's mouth bleed that one time he tried, and it smells like those strange circles he once found with the other four-leggers that had obeyed Man. It feels like water, though, with the way it's cool and causing his fur to feel damp. Curiosity gets the better of him, the same way it did with the red flowers, and before he knows it, Will's putting his mouth to the water to get a taste.

It tastes like nothing Will's ever drank before.

And that is when his instincts reassert themselves, and he notices that the trail has abruptly ended around this pool, so whatever huge creature caused it is still around. Nearby. Possibly right nearby. And probably very, very angry, given all the blood in the pool.

The blood Will is drinking.

Fear sends him leaping straight out of the pool, and he finds himself stumbling like a newborn fawn, until he falls backwards against a solid pair of legs.

Will swallows. The Great Prince sometimes follows him, and he really, really doesn't want to explain this.

Except when he looks up . . . he doesn't see the towering crown of antlers. Will cranes his head back even further, and still sees nothing, so he rolls around to his feet, trying and failing to come up with any reason for his flight and drink that don't sound so utterly ridiculous out loud as they do in his head.

What Will sees when he stands, though, drives every other thought.

Forget the Great Prince of the Forest. This is the biggest stag he's ever seen, bigger than the cocky young fawns who prance around the meadow to bully the others, bigger than the proud bucks who lock antlers to impress the young does and fawns, bigger than even the great Prince of the Forest, with antlers as tall as Will himself and feathers as black as night and eyes that glow red like the setting sun.

Slowly, ever so slowly, that great head lowers, until the stag's nose is two inches from Will's twitching one.

"Hello, little fawn," says the great stag, "what have we here?"

Will, of course, does the sensible thing.

He runs.

For a second, he imagines that the shaking of the ground around him is the great stag giving chase. He runs even faster when he realizes that it is the great stag bellowing with laughter.

Will has vivid dreams that night. For the first time in a long time, he dreams of antlers, black as night and dripping with blood, sprouting from his back and growing so high that he's crushed under their weight. But this time, he doesn't scream, because there is no fear. These antlers are tools of a greater master, and under his coaxing, Will pushes and strains and reaches, until he can stand on his own wobbling four feet, his crown of antlers touching the stars until they shine as red as the blood moon, and red eyes laugh at him from the darkness.

Perhaps that dream is why Will is not quite as startled as he should be when he wakes up to find the great black stag waiting calmly outside.

Will freezes with one foot out of the door. The stag is sunning himself calmly in a patch of soft green grass, unbothered by the dripping of the melting snow onto his antlers. Now, in the light of day and without fear clouding his senses, he can see that the reason the stag is so black is not simply because of coloring, but because there are feathers decorating the upper half of his body, feathers as dark as a raven. The antlers are still huge and imposing though, and as blank as his red eyes.

"What are you?"

The stag tsks at him. "Now, now, little fawn," he chides, "that's not a nice way to say good morning."

All Will can say is, "It's not morning."

The stag tilts his head. On anyone else, it would be ridiculous, because it would unbalance the crown and cause his neck to strain. On this stag, it looks purposeful and regal, as though the antlers were as a light as the feathers on his neck.

“I suppose that is also true,” the stag says finally. He shakes himself all over, and sunlight scatters off his feathers. “Do you know how to survive during winter, little fawn?”

“The Great Prince is showing me.”

“The Great Prince is very old,” the stag murmurs. “He can barely survive a winter on his own, much less with you tagging along.”

Indignation overrides instinct, and Will finds himself mirroring the stag, head up high and eyes unblinking, radiating the same sense of danger and control that the stag has. “And what’s it to you?” he challenges. “He took me in when no one else would.”

That provokes a reaction.

The stag stands, towering once more, although he consents again to lower his head to Will’s eye level. “No one?” he asks. “Such a pity. Although not for me. I propose a deal, little fawn.”

Will knows all about deals. The bucks were fond of striking them amongst themselves, and he’s been the target more than once. Two steps back take him deeper into his thicket, so that the opening itself becomes a barrier to the world. Even this stag, he thinks – he hopes – would find such a narrow opening a deterrent.

“I don’t want to be your friend,” he says flatly.

“Why? You don’t find me interesting?”

“I don’t care if you’re interesting. My last friend tried to push me off a cliff.”

“Why, how rude,” the stag says, and in his voice it someone doesn’t seem as ridiculous as the way the Great Prince had said it was. The Great Prince had shrugged him off and told him to start learning how to jump, because that was how the forest worked. This stag, though . . . he sounds like this statement is akin to someone scent marking all over his patch of grass.

“Because showing up at someone’s home and asking probing questions isn’t rude?” Will shoots back, because Will, as his mother used to sigh, does not know how to give up.

That provokes yet another unexpected reaction, and the stag throws back his head and *laughs*. The forest doesn’t shake around Will this time, although many birds do take flight from the trees and when the stag stomps his foot, Will can hear a dozen soft thumps as snow patches are shaken from their resting place.

When the laughter finally stops, the stag steps forward. Once, twice, thrice, until most of his face is inside Will’s thicket. Somehow, the branches don’t seem to deter him, even though they scratch at his crown of antlers.

“Here is my deal, little fawn,” the stag announces, still laughing softly. “I will teach you the things the Great Prince cannot, and in return, you will tell me your name.”

“Will,” he says automatically, without thinking about what he’s doing, “my name is Will.”

“Will,” the stag repeats, and his name feels strange and alien for the first time. He doesn’t even respond, because for some reason it sounds nothing like his own name and all too much like his own name. “Well, Will, my name is Hannibal. Follow me.”

And Will can’t do anything but obey.

Hannibal, despite his strange features and strange mouthful of a name, is a good teacher. Will might even say he’s better than the Great Prince, although Hannibal never calls him that and laughed so hard when he said it the last time that branches fell all over and Will had pine leaves all over his body.

Hannibal had least, once he’d stopped laughing, come over to nuzzle his back and clean off the remaining leaves.

Hannibal shows him how to rip down the bark, the best places to seek evergreens, what leaves are still good to eat and what leaves prick him in the mouth. He guides him to the streams that are still strong enough that the river flows with no ice, but weak enough that if he tumbles in, he’ll be cold but not swept away. During the coldest nights, he settles next to Will and winds his long body around him, and Hannibal’s so warm that the occasional prick of the huge antlers on Hannibal’s head don’t even bother him.

Despite all of Hannibal’s efforts, though, Will still gets ill.

Will wakes up to find the world so blurry he can’t tell the thicket branches from Hannibal’s antlers, and he startles so badly that Hannibal nearly steps on him. It takes a long time for him to calm down, although course Will can barely walk so at least he doesn’t get far. Hannibal doesn’t laugh, but Will can tell he wants to.

Will’s pretty sure he accidentally calls Hannibal “Mother” when he leaves, though, and for that, he does get laughed at.

Still, Hannibal returns but a few hours later, cheeks bulging, and when Will tilts his head up in inquiry, Hannibal skips the scenting and goes straight for licking intently at Will’s mouth. Confused, he opens it, and Hannibal’s throat does the strangest movement and suddenly mush is sliding into Will’s mouth. Instinct drives him to swallow it, and it’s dripping everywhere and mushy and tastes really very strange, but Will can’t tell if that’s because he’s sick or because it’s some strange remedy Hannibal mashed around his mouth until Will could swallow it.

Either way, though, it settles his grumbling stomach and makes him dizzy with sleep.

Hannibal settles beside him and starts determinedly licking all over him, and Will finally gives up and lets him, instead of urging him outside to get his own food.

Every single day, like clockwork, Hannibal emerges from the thicket, shakes himself out, prances off, and then returns shortly afterward with the mush. Eventually, it stops making him tired and Will finds himself actually craving it, perking up his ears when Hannibal

returns and licking at *his* mouth instead of having his mouth coaxed open by Hannibal, eager to fill his rumbling belly with whatever mushy goodness Hannibal has brought.

Hannibal doesn't complain or flinch or stop, and for that, Will finds he's even more attached to Hannibal than before.

Now, he doesn't even think about the Great Prince, he finds.

He dreams about Hannibal.

The one positive side of being ill is that it gives time for Will to make friends with creatures who don't care that he's basically a huge messy pile, because his illness makes it fairly obvious from the start.

One of them is a rabbit named Winston. Will is fairly fascinated with him because he has golden fur the likes of which Will's never seen before, and he's also the quietest rabbit Will's ever heard. Even Hannibal seems surprised by how quiet Winston is, given that the rabbits always practically shake down the forest when they start a thumping contest.

Will appreciates the quiet nature though. With Winston, Will can just lay quietly in the thicket and watch the sun move across the sky as the snow starts to melt, and Winston is content to sit next to him and chew on leaves.

His other friend is a little skunk named Buster. Buster, unlike Winston, is the chattiest creature in the entire forest, it seems. Will learns so much more about his fellow creatures than he thinks he would ever want to. For example, Gail the owl has found a new nesting site, Olly the beaver is having a fight with his mate about whether or where to move their den, and Chad the chipmunk managed to make off with an entire cache from someone else. To Will, it sounds like useless trivia facts, but Buster discusses it so fervently one might think he was drawing up battle plans against his fellow skunks to defend his territory.

Hannibal, for the most part, seems to largely ignore what happens when he's not at the thicket, and Buster and Winston have the good sense to flee from Hannibal whenever he approaches.

"Please don't kill them," Will says immediately, the first time Hannibal sneaks up and Winston and Buster are frozen beside him in the middle of a scandalous – so Buster says – rendition about how Alana and her mother are taking food from a two-legger called Margot.

Hannibal snorts. "Why would I do that, little fawn? They are besides themselves with fear. And fear always does make the meat so bitter."

Buster swallows so audibly that Will's ears twitch in sympathy. Winston tries to melt into the thicket.

"Hannibal."

The great stag laughs and folds himself down, curling around Will and resting his red eyes unblinkingly upon Buster. “Do continue,” he says politely, “I am very interested in this tale of Alana and her scandals.”

“Well, they defied the Great Prince’s edict,” Buster says slowly, after a long moment, tail still twitching. “Apparently there’s a great big dead-tree-thicket on the edge of the forest, apart from the stone-thicket, and there’s a female two-legger who comes out and leaves food. Apparently she’s very partial to Alana and gives out the best treats and – ”

When they leave, quickly and still panicky, Hannibal snorts another laugh.

“Seriously, please don’t kill them.”

“You have so little faith in me, little fawn,” Hannibal chides, and begins the arduous task of grooming Will yet again. Still, his words are acknowledgement, so Will just closes his eyes and leans into the grooming.

Of course, it doesn’t last forever. Twitterpating season comes around not that long after, and Winston and Buster abandon him in short order to find families of their own. Will doesn’t begrudge them. It’s not like he’s the most interesting companion in the forest compared to members of their own kind, although he still doesn’t quite understand twitterpating, as the Great Prince called it.

Besides, Will still has Hannibal.

Will’s recovered pretty well by the time all the snow finally melts and the forest starts brimming with life yet again. Hannibal still feeds him, every once in a while, but he no longer grooms Will so obsessively and no longer keeps such a close eye on him. Hannibal wanders off at all hours, and sometimes doesn’t even return to settle down with Will at night, although he’s always there when Will wakes up.

That’s why, the first time Will’s head gets stuck in the flowering branches of a tree he’d never had problems going under before, Will gets the realization that he’s growing antlers without Hannibal around.

Caught up the excitement yet with no around, Will feels the strangest bubbling urge to brag.

He’s growing antlers.

He’s finally becoming a real stag.

Just – *antlers*.

It is that urge that drives Will to the visit the meadow for the first time since his mother left or died or . . . well. Since that.

So at first, Will thinks that everyone's not talking to him and giving him a wide berth because of that stigma, and because he hasn't been around. He's mostly lost his spots, and he's grown taller, and now that he has antlers, he has a moment where he wonders if they even recognize him or if he looks completely different.

He gets his shock of reality when a very lovely doe walks determinedly up to him yet stops a few feet from him.

"Will? Is that you?"

"Alana!" he beams. "Alana, I have antlers!"

The scream is not what he was expecting.

"What?" he says. He twists his neck, hoping that there aren't any pine leaves or flowers on him. He thought he'd cleaned everything off. "What's wrong?"

Alana takes two steps back. "Will," she whispers, and once again his name sounds nothing like his name. It's so full of emotion he can barely recognize it as belonging to him. "Will . . . your antlers . . . they're black."

Will shrugs. Is that it? "Aren't they all black?"

Alana shakes her head, and just as she does, another buck comes up beside her, eyes beady and a burgeoning crown of his own.

However. His crown isn't black.

It's brown. The same color as most of their fur, a tawny-white mix like the trees Will and Hannibal had stripped the bark off of.

"Why are you spending time with this black crown fawn?" the other stag says, rather rudely. Hannibal's very particular about rudeness, and Will has learned to swallow most of it, so now to see it so boldly in front of him is a bit of a shock.

"Leave him alone, Pazzi," Alana says sharply, and she even steps away from him. "Will – what – where have you been? No antlers grow that color. What have you been *eating*? We've been looking for you."

"I . . . I've been with Hannibal."

"Who's Hannibal?"

Which is when Pazzi loses his patience and starts herding Alana away, poking her with his crown and stepping in her way when she tries to sidestep. She tries to kick him, but he snaps his teeth, and instinct drives her back.

“Will,” Alana cries, “Will, what’s happened to you? Will, I don’t – Will – ”

Something about that sets off something inside him.

The other bucks have always, always tried to drive Alana and Beverly away, claiming that he’s a terrible influence, but beforehand, Alana and Beverly’s sharp tongues and snappy hooves had kept them back. Now Will hasn’t even been around in months and months, and they still won’t accept him. Or even let him *talk* to Alana, and all he wants to do is talk, and hear more about what is so wrong about black crowns.

Suddenly, Will finds himself with his head tilted down, teeth bared and hooves digging furrows in the dirt.

“Stop.”

Pazzi laughs at him, still snapping his teeth at Alana. “What are you going to do, black crown fawn?” he taunts. “You wouldn’t even be able to strip leaves with those baby stubs of yours. How would you even – ”

One second, Pazzi is talking, and the next, Will’s head is attached to Pazzi’s chest by way of antlers. Pazzi lets loose a terrible scream of agony and attempts to turn to gore Will in return, but Will keeps pushing and pushing, and when Pazzi falls, Will rears up and drives down and down and down, vision red with rage, so angry that he can feel himself vibrating. Unless the world is vibrating around him, which is also possible. Either way, he keeps going and going and going until Pazzi looks less like a buck with an ugly smirk and a brown crown and more like mush and dripping red with four weak little legs and pinpricks of bone.

When Will stops, he finds that every deer is rooted in the spot, staring at him the same way they’d stared at the Great Prince.

Only, back then, they had lowered their heads in respect.

Now, every single tail and ear is up in alarm.

Even Alana is far away.

“Alana,” Will says. “Alana.”

Alana takes a step back, and another. It’s a dreadful reverse parody of the first time they had ever met, when she’d took the initiative to greet him and welcome him. “Will,” she whispers, “what have you done?”

“Invasive,” someone else says, and then someone else says it, and yet another, until Will’s surrounded by a wave of whispers.

Finally, the wave grows so strong that Will forces himself to be the jetty against which it breaks, and he rears up and slams back down, driving his hooves deep into the dirt, in an attempt to drive out the voices in his head.

When Will looks back up, the entire meadow is deserted. All that is left is his own panting breaths, and what's less of Pazzi.

And Hannibal, approaching slowly from behind.

"Hannibal."

"Will," Hannibal returns, stopping just behind him, his voice as bland as Will's ever heard it.

"What have you done?"

"Me?" Hannibal circles around, with careful, light footsteps that belie just how strong and fast the stag really is. "I am not the one with a corpse at my feet. What have you done, my dear Will?"

"She said . . . They said . . ."

"They told you that your antlers were black," Hannibal finishes. "And what a lovely color they are."

Will can feel his stance widening and his head coming down. The rage is building again, but slower and more potent than before. "What. Did. You. Do." The words barely escape past the grinding of his teeth, and they're so soft he can barely even hear them, but he knows Hannibal can, the exact same way he can feel Hannibal's presence.

"I did exactly what I promised to," Hannibal replies. "I fed you and sheltered you. I taught you to survive. I made you strong, dearest Will, and such a lovely proof of that strength to receive."

That's not true, Will wants to say. *You didn't make me strong. I was already strong. No, you made me like you.*

"What are you?"

Hannibal tsks. "Rather rude."

"Answer."

Hannibal's eyes gleam with amusement for the first time, sparked, Will imagines, by his defiance, whereas before he would have took back the rudeness knowing how much Hannibal despises it. "I am a Ravenstag. Humans – thicket-mates of Alana's human Margot, in fact – imported me from my home forest, for the sake of sport. I believe that they thought I would make a good hunt." Hannibal makes an irritated noise. "My kind have no natural predators for a reason. Humans are no exception."

Will's throat feels dry, dry as the harsh bark he chewed to survive in the days before Hannibal entered his life. He sees visions of black antlers dripping in blood, and the first, he realizes it's not just a vision. Hannibal's antlers have often dripped of blood. Will just always assumed it was his eyes seeing things that were not there, and not Hannibal, being something that shouldn't exist.

“You wonder what I did to them, I assume?” When Will makes no answer, Hannibal forges ahead anyways. “Well, of course, they could not find us, even with their dogs and gear. So they resorted to traps, and drained the rivers and mowed down parts of the forest and erected new fences as tall as the great oaks. Eventually my poor sister fell into a pit and broke her legs. They had put spikes in it, you see, so that we could not clamber back out. So imagine my shock when the next night I found them whistling and singing by the fire, my sister’s beautiful coat hanging to dry from their sticky fingers and her bones piled beside them, and her legs and body sitting in their greedy bellies. Just imagine, my dear Will, I know you’re good at that.”

Will is good.

Too good.

He can see it, plain as day, men boasting and clapping by a large fire, plates dripping with grease haphazardly on the ground, neat piles of bones by the fire, and a gorgeous coat of feathers and fur propped up against a tent with men fingering it and sighing at its loveliness.

Will sees greed and ignorance and above all, Hannibal’s overwhelming rage.

“What did you do?”

“I reminded them why ravenstags have no natural predators,” Hannibal said simply. “And then I wandered out, and what should I come across but a little fawn drinking from blood.”

For the first time, Will realizes Hannibal is not telling him something.

“No, that’s not true,” Will interrupts. “The first time you didn’t come across me. It was another . . . another . . . deer.”

And Will can see it now, unfolding like a beautiful prickly red rose in his mind’s eye, Hannibal goring this deer and ripping into it and stuffing himself, because if nature will take his sister, Hannibal will take everything back, because nothing can ever replace her, and his is a stomach that will never be full, no matter what he catches.

Hannibal chewing up the deer, grinding it all together, and sliding it gleefully, lovingly, gently into the depths of Will’s throat.

“You – ”

Will puts his head down and charges straight at Hannibal.

When Will wakes up, he’s not in their thicket. It’s a lot bigger, for starters, and it has a soft bed of grass growing underneath. The opening is bigger too, taller and wider as if better meant for Hannibal’s huge crown. When he finally gathers enough nerve to stumble to his feet and poke his head out, he sees that he’s in a huge cave depression, where the mouth leads to the tunnel to the cliff face and the walls are sheer rock but the ceiling is open and shows

only the sun. There's even a little merry stream of water, bubbling down the one wall and gathering in a shallow pool.

That is where Hannibal is.

He's sitting down, but he's no less regal or tall than before. Even though he's grown, Will could swear Hannibal's grown too, so that their size difference is still the same.

"How did it feel?" Hannibal asks. "To crush life beneath your hooves?"

Will swallows the instant response. He has a nasty feeling Hannibal would enjoy it. "What did you do to me?" he says instead.

Hannibal's crown lifts and dips. "I fed you as I fed my sister and myself," he replies. "We are omnivores, Will. We are not limited to bark and leaves and grass. There is a whole world of food out to eat."

Will sinks down to the grass, legs crumpling under him like leaves in water. "I can't go back," he says, and it's hardly even a question.

"I have you, and you have me," is all Hannibal says.

For the first time since the meadow, Will raises his head and makes direct eye contact. Hannibal's eyes aren't red now, he notes idly. They scared him the first time, because they were red. Now they're a liquid gold, bright and fierce but somehow softer, more insidious. They look like liquid sun ready to swallow him up and coat him until he's nothing but gold too, except it isn't sun. It's blood and darkness and death.

"Your becoming was glorious," Hannibal remarks, pushing to his feet and coming close to nuzzle at his antlers. "I am sad you did not see it."

And he is sad, the lying liar.

Will closes his eyes in defeat. He needs Hannibal, he can't deny it. And beneath all that, deep down, it's more than need.

He wants Hannibal.

And Hannibal wants him.

"I liked crushing Pazzi," he whispers, knowing Hannibal will hear him. Hannibal rewards him with a lick. "It felt . . . powerful."

"And so you are," Hannibal tells him, adoring, and his voice is so full of righteous pride that Will is fairly bursting just from feeling it second-hand. "You are glorious, my darling Will, and you will be greater than any Great Prince of the Forest. You will be a Ravenstag. And I will never ever let you go."

Many Years Later

Abigail is cold and her mind is sluggish and her feet are sore and bruised, but she continues onwards determinedly nonetheless. She has a mission, and she's going to finish it no matter what obstacles are in her way.

Finally, she is rewarded with the sight of a long narrow cave with water running down the side, and she beams. She had carefully tracked and memorized this sight to return to after The Incident, and she is grateful that the distance was not as terrible as she thought it would be, although of course all of it will be useless if the ones she seeks are not present inside.

She takes one step and then another inside, and to her, each step sounds as long as a stampede, even though she knows she isn't making much noise.

And then she's through, and setting foot in a lush little thicket area, and while she's busy gasping, one of the creatures materializes behind her, head cocked and eyes curious, for she doesn't sense any aggression from him.

"And who are you, little fawn?" says the great stag.

Abigail clears her throat. She has to lock her legs to stop them from wobbling, but the stag seems to respect that, so she opens her mouth. "You chased Garret away. After he killed my mom, I mean."

The stag makes a considering hum. "Not quite me, little fawn."

"What?"

"Hannibal, who are you talking – Oh."

Another creature, almost identical but for their height and the unique twists of their antlers, appears behind her. Abigail would call him softer and gentler, but for the fact that upon beholding both of them together, she now realizes that it was not the first, taller stag who had gored her father down and driven him off. It was the gentler one, although when she'd first seen him, all she could see was rage and pure fire, enough to give her father a taste of fear for the first time ever.

"Collecting strays again, are we?" the first stag says affectionately, striding over to rub his cheeks over the second gentler stag.

He determinedly ignores the caress. "What are you doing here, Abigail?"

"I . . . I . . ."

"Well, spit it out."

"I want to become like you!"

That stops both stags in their tracks. The first, taller stag lifts his head immediately, interest all over his face from his alert eyes to his pricked ears, while the second, gentler stag lowers himself, almost as if bracing for a blow Abigail can't possibly deliver. It's like an entire spectrum of reactions, right there in front of her.

“It’s a very long process,” the first stag says, voice solemn.

“No, Hannibal.”

“You’ve collected strays before, Will. How is this any different?”

“Um, she has a family? Parents, for example?”

The first stag blinks. “You drove off her father, and I cannot imagine he lived much longer given the delightful wounds you inflicted,” he says placidly, as though discussing what type of grass he prefers. “And her mother lies dead at his antlers, which, as I might remind you, is why you interfered in the first place. She has no family.”

“Hannibal.”

“We are her fathers now, Will.”

“Hannibal.”

“Will.”

The two engage in a staring contest, and Abigail holds her breath. It’s a crystallized moment, one on one end and the other at the far side and she imagines that if she so much as blew a breath, it would all shatter, and she’d wake up seeing this as a dream, with her father back to torturing her mother every single day and kicking her whenever he saw fit.

Except the sun shines kindly today, because instead a miracle happens – something gives, and her savior looks away with a heavy sigh while the winner gives a self-satisfied shake of his body.

“On one condition,” her savior says.

“Anything,” Abigail says, and she knows that he knows she means it, with everything that she is.

He wrinkles his nose. “You wash off that awful stink of Garrett. I can barely smell the real you under it, and I’m sure Hannibal is about dying to groom you properly.”

Abigail freezes. “Groom . . . groom me?” No one’s groomed her in a long time. Her father had forbidden her mother from doing it, saying that it made her too soft and he needed it more to deal with the pressures of being a full-grown adult.

Hannibal leans forward, and somehow, for a stag so tall, it doesn’t seem that he does anything before he’s suddenly at eye level, eyes glowing bright gold. He gives her a confident, soothing lick up her neck, and she shivers at the sense of danger that emanates from every part of him. He is true danger where her father was smoke and shadow, and if she can even be only half of what his danger represents, she will be content.

“Welcome, dearest Abigail,” Hannibal says. “We will make you strong.”

FINIS

End Notes

Phew! I hope you enjoyed all the deer chatter, even if it was sadly lacking in the deer puns some of my friends wanted. (I'm not sorry, and you know who you are.)

So much thanks again to the mods over at HBB 2016 for dealing with my constant e-mails and questions, as well as for running this whole damn thing.

Also, I swear to god that I underwent Baader-Meinhof Phenomenon (that thing where once you see something, suddenly you see it everywhere) this entire big bang process, cuz the second I started writing this monster, I was suddenly seeing all the flying dik dik art and the Hugh Dancy as a lost Disney model art all over the place. . .

Aaaand if you've managed to make it all the way down here after all my ramblings, HI. HELLO. Have a cookie. :D

You can also come say hi to me on Telegram as TheSilverQueen : Tumblr as thesilverqueenlady : Twitter as silverqueenlady : NewTumbl as thesilverqueen : Dreamwidth as thesilverqueenlady

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